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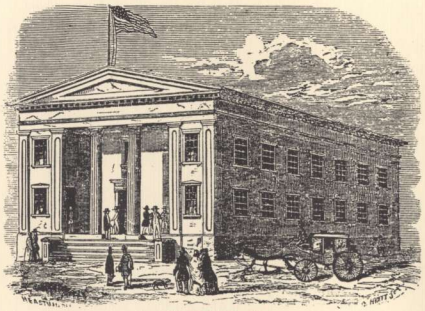
9-85

BENICIA CAPITOL
State Historic Park



"City Hall," Benicia.

This is one of the finest public buildings in the State, and as it stands in commanding position, presents a most imposing appearance from the bays and Straits of Carquines. The ground plan is forty-five feet by eighty-seven feet; the base four feet above ground, is of Benicia free stone; the building is carried up through the two stories, of brick walls 16 and 12 inches thick; lower story 14 feet, upper 15 feet in the clear. In the front of the building is a recess of 8 feet deep by 25 feet wide, divided into three openings, by two fluted columns of solid masonry, resting upon stone bases and capped with ornamental stone capitals. On each corner of the building, and also on each corner of the recess, is a pilaster, projecting 4 inches from the face of the wall, also capped with ornamental stone capitals. In front, at the corner of the recess are two stone buttresses, between which the steps ascend to the three entrances.

The main hall above, is 42x57 feet, which is approached by two flights of winding stairs, landing opposite each other, in the upper entrance.

The lower hall is 42x46 feet, and approachd immediately from the main entrance. Besides the main halls there are six other rooms of convenient sizes, opening on either hand from the entrance halls. The roof is a self supporting truss roof, projecting over the walls two feet, and supported by ornamental brackets around the entire building. The structure reflects great credit upon the builders, Messrs. Honghton & Rider.

The hall is connected with the steamboat landing by a fine new plank sidewalk, leading through the main street of the town, and by all the principal hotels, Post Office and stores. The Common Council of Benicia has agreed to deed the said hall, gratis, to the State, in case the Legislature shall see fit to sit there.

Placer Times & Transcript, December 30, 1852

"That Benicia was the best natural site for a commercial city I am satisfied, and had half the money and half the labor been bestowed upon it that has been spent on San Francisco, we should this day have a city of palaces on the Carquinez Straits."

From the ***Memoirs*** of General William T. Sherman

The fourth session of the California Legislature convened in this building in 1853 and for one year, February 1853 to February 1854, the optimistic little boom town of Benicia filled to overflowing with the extraordinary vitality, intensity, and turbulence that characterized political life amid the explosive growth years of the California gold rush.

Many discussions and debates took place in this building during 1853, but one issue underlay and influenced all the others: Slavery! the question struck at the very cornerstone of the Union and eventually led, as we all know today, to the terrible tragedy of civil war. In California in 1853 – even though most everyone preferred to discuss less heated, less divisive matters – the slavery issue nevertheless dictated California's basic pattern of political loyalties and thereby influenced, directly or indirectly, every issue that came before the Legislature in Benicia.

BENICIA THE BOOM TOWN

"Great sale of city lots – The streets are 80 feet wide, alleys 20 feet wide. Lots 50 yards front and 40 yards back. The whole city comprises five square miles. In front of the city is a commodious bay, large enough for 200 ships to ride at anchor, safe from any wind."

From ***The Californian***, Monterey, 1846

Robert Semple

The City of Benicia was founded in 1847 by Robert Semple, the towering giant of a man (six feet eight to seven feet tall by various accounts) who was a leader of the Bear Flag Revolt and other important California enterprises after 1845. Born to a prominent, politically active Kentucky family, Semple was widely known for his strong opinions and for his boundless optimism, enthusiasm, and vigor. Trained as a printer, dentist, lawyer, M.D., and riverboat pilot, he possessed an amazingly diverse background that was of great value in early-day California. Semple's fascination with Benicia as the site for an important new city began in 1846 when he transported a prisoner of the Bear Flag Party, General Mariano Vallejo, from Sonoma to Sutter's Fort. Semple was impressed by the site's potential, and learned that Vallejo held title to the area under a Mexican land grant. Within a year Semple was part owner with Vallejo of five square miles surrounding the site of the prospective city. As of May 17, 1847, Thomas O. Larkin, one of California's leading citizens and financiers, also became a partner in the venture.

Soon the new city was being promoted energetically. Advertisements appeared in California's first regularly printed newspaper, *The Californian*, which Semple created, published, and for a time even printed. Semple also established and personally operated a ferry service between Benicia and Martinez. He also spent a great deal of time and energy encouraging merchants, land speculators, builders, shipping companies, and even the U.S. Army and Navy to select Benicia as their home base in California.

By 1850 the rapidly growing town (population 1,000) was incorporated and named the Solano County seat. The U.S. Army established Benicia Arsenal in March 1849, and in 1850 the Pacific Mail Steamship Company decided to establish its major west coast depot and repair shop at Benicia.

A campaign was also launched in 1849 to locate the state capital at Benicia, but the Legislature failed to designate a permanent location at that time and ended up in temporary quarters in San Jose. Later, as town bid against town for the honor and advantage of becoming the state capital, the Legislature moved from San Jose to Vallejo to Sacramento and back again to Vallejo. But by January 1853, when the fourth session of the Legislature convened in the large wooden statehouse Mariano Vallejo had built in the town that still bears his name, the time had finally come for Benicia.

"The healthiness of the location of Benicia has passed into a familiar proverb, and she has now at hand abundant materials for the construction of permanent structures of brick and stone. . .

From the ***California Gazette*** October 4, 1851

The debate was complex, prolonged, and sometimes heated, but on February 4, 1853, a resolution was passed by the Legislature calling for removal of the capital to Benicia, where the city fathers and other ambitious pioneer-promoters had managed to construct a handsome two-story, red-brick "city hall." For the moment, it seemed that Robert Semple's dream city was about to become a reality.

"This is one of the finest public buildings in the State, and as it stands in a commanding position, presents a most imposing appearance from the bays and Straits of Carquinez. . .the hall is connected with the steamboat landing by a fine new plank sidewalk leading through the main street of the town, and by all the principal hotels, Post Office and stores. . ."

From ***The Placer Times and Transcript***
December 30, 1852

Ironically, however, Semple himself was no longer fully able to enjoy the prospect. His health broken by typhoid fever, stress, and overexertion, Semple was forced to decline the nomination for governor in 1852 and to give up some of his other partially fulfilled dreams. After serving with distinction as president of the California Constitutional Convention in Monterey in 1849, he might very well have gone on to the governor's chair, and it is interesting to speculate the impact "Governor" Semple might have had on the destiny of Benicia, the ever-so-promising "City-of-the-Straits."

Instead of rising to greater prominence along with Benicia, however, Robert Semple left the city in 1852 and went into cattle ranching in the Sacramento Valley with his nephew, Will S. Green of Williams. On October 25, 1854, Semple died in quiet obscurity after a prolonged illness. He was buried on his ranch, Rancho Alamo, a few miles west of Colusa.

BENICIA THE CAPITAL

"Thither [to Benicia] that conveniently portable piece of public property, the State Archives, will next be trundled, and there the herd of politicians in the State be gathered together in the name of office. . .a pious conclave for which a better rodeo ground than Benicia could not have been selected."

From ***The Alta California***, February 5, 1853

The painters and carpenters had scarcely time enough to sweep up and clear away their tools before the Legislature began arriving in Benicia to occupy the new capitol building. The steam-tug ***Firefly*** and two scows were chartered to move the state archives and furniture from the "old" capitol at Vallejo, and on Saturday evening, February 9, 1853, a grand ball was held in the Assembly Chambers of the new statehouse to celebrate the move. A brass band from the nearby military barracks played far into the night for the pleasure of the numerous guests, some of whom came all the way from San Francisco or Sacramento expressly for the event.

With the Legislature in session and numerous visitors, messengers, secretaries, and lobbyists looking in on the legislators for one reason or another, Benicia became very lively. Hotel space was at a premium. New buildings continued to spring up – especially alongside the new boardwalk that connected the waterfront steamer landing with the capitol building. Even Benicia's night life took on a touch of big-city liveliness. The saloon in one leading hotel, for example, decided to stay open around the clock and proudly announced that it had not one but two pianos for the entertainment of all and sundry.

Inside the stately halls of the Legislature, business moved at a dizzying pace. In a little more than ninety days the twenty-seven Senators and sixty-three Assemblymen who made up the Legislature of 1853 submitted and considered four hundred and sixty bills. One hundred and eighty of those bills were approved and subsequently signed into law by Governor Bigler. Minutes of the meetings were printed overnight in San Francisco in both English and Spanish. Smoking was prohibited within the Capitol, though chewing tobacco was acceptable and a brass spittoon was provided each lawmaker.

Governor John Bigler

Among the more important legislative accomplishments of the fourth session were the establishment of an asylum for the insane on donated land near Stockton. Regulations were also established for committing, conveying, and maintaining the insane. A flour inspection system was created, complete with penalties for false branding or counterfeiting of brands or marks. Flour was to be graded "Superfine", "Fine", "Middling", "Bad", or "Condemned". (Inspectors were appointed and promised five cents for every pound of flour they inspected.) A lumber inspection service was also established with a measurer to be stationed at San Francisco. Codification of all California's statutes was carried out in order to identify the many conflicting or ineffective statutes already on the books. A board of prison commissioners was constituted and authorized to enter into a contract for the erection of a state prison at San Quentin for not more than $153,315.

As president of the State Senate, Lieutenant Governor Samuel Purdy settled one of the most hotly debated issues of the year by casting his tie-breaking Senate vote against further extension of the San Francisco waterfront into San Francisco Bay. This measure had been proposed and justified as a way to pay off the state government's rapidly growing debt. But the fact was that two-thirds of the income from the sale of waterfront lots would have gone to a handful of speculators – including several leading State Senators and Assemblymen.

By far the most important single legislative proposition before the Legislature of 1853 was a bill calling for revision of the state

constitution. This matter was put forward in glowingly patriotic language as something intended to serve the general welfare. The real motive behind all the rhetoric, however, was a pro-slavery, pro-Southern drive to divide the state in two – north and south. The southern state would be pro-slave (and thus tip the Congressional balance in Washington, D.C.) while the northern state, though technically still a "free" state (as per the famous "Clay Compromise of 1850") might nevertheless still be dominated by a clever coalition of Whigs (conservatives) and pro-slavery Southern Democrats.

The leader of pro-slavery political interests in California was Senator William Gwin, the very wealthy and aristocratic Southern Democrat who controlled the flow of federal patronage into California (jobs, contracts, appointments, etc.) through his position in the U.S. Senate. The leading anti-slavery spokesman in California was David C. Broderick, a Jacksonian or Free Soil Democrat who had grown up and served his political apprenticeship among the working-class immigrants of New York City. Unlike Gwin and the "Chivalry" Democrats, Broderick and his supporters were unalterably opposed to slavery in any form. They believed that state and federal land policies should lead to the creation of a society of free and independent landowners. Along with many other national leaders including presidents Jefferson and Jackson, Broderick therefore favored distribution of the public domain to the landless poor through "homestead" legislation. Broderick also favored and fought for universal suffrage, protection of foreign-born minorities from discriminatory taxation, and the open election of most public officials.

William Gwin

David C. Broderick

Whigs and pro-Southern Chivalry Democrats had great power in the Legislature of 1853 (largely due to Gwin's control of federal patronage), and they planned to use this advantage to hand-pick the delegates to a constitutional convention that would divide the state without further public debate. Broderick and his allies, however, fought this proposal at every turn. Finally, after a prolonged parliamentary struggle, they struck upon a simple, irresistable proposal: that the people of California be allowed to vote on – to approve or disapprove – any recommendation that might be put forward by the proposed constitutional convention.

Some legislative reporters called Broderick's amendment a simple "correction" of a "technical oversight," but in fact the proposed amendment killed the whole scheme, for even Gwin's most dedicated and optimistic supporters knew that the people of California were generally opposed to slavery and would not vote to divide the state.

The great contest between pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces was also evident in many other ways throughout the year that Benicia was the capital. Gwin's seat in the U.S. Senate became the focal point of this contest early in 1853 when rumors began to circulate about the possibility that Gwin might be appointed to President Franklin Pierce's cabinet. Broderick laid plans to take Gwin's Senate seat and stop the flow of federal patronage to pro-slavery democrats.

When Gwin was not appointed, Broderick immediately launched a direct, all-out campaign to unseat Gwin. To do this, Broderick set out to broaden his base of support in the State Senate, the body that was then empowered to select California's U.S. Senators. When the State Democratic Convention met in Benicia in June 1853, Broderick asked the Sacramento delegation to support him. In return, Broderick and his powerful San Francisco delegation agreed to support a Sacramento man, Governor John Bigler, in his bid for re-election. Broderick and his supporters also agreed to another request made by the Sacramento delegation: that the capital be moved to Sacramento.

In September 1853, with Broderick's help, Bigler upset the odds-makers and was narrowly re-elected. On January 4, 1854, in his first major address to the fifth Legislature, the governor called for removal of the capital from Benicia due to "the insecure condition of the public archives." Benicia boosters offered to build a new brick building to house the archives – at no cost to the state! They also

offered other inducements, but the die was cast. Legislation was soon submitted, and although the debate was long and heated, it soon became clear that a majority of legislators were ready to make Sacramento the "permanent" capital.

On February 25, 1854, Governor Bigler signed the legislation and the very next day the Legislature resolved to adjourn and meet one week later in Sacramento. That same afternoon a large festive party including the governor, state officers, and members of the Legislature gaily debarked from Benicia on the paddle-wheeled river steamer *Wilson G. Hunt*. A grand celebration awaited them upstream in Sacramento. But the city they were leaving – Benicia, the proud "City-of-the Straits" – was profoundly quiet. Its year of glory was over, and its once bright future was now clouded.

REMOVAL OF THE CAPITAL.
DESTINATION—"*The other side of Jordan.*"

From San Francisco ***Golden Era***, April 2, 1854

LATER HISTORY OF THE BENICIA CAPITOL BUILDING

The City of Benicia continued to flourish in some ways even after removal of the capital. Several important educational institutions were established, the Pacific Mail Steamship Company continued to use Benicia as a major port of entry, and eventually the transcontinental Southern Pacific Railroad established a terminal and ferry crossing at Benicia.

Benicia is a very pretty place; the situation is well chosen, the land gradually sloping back from the water, with ample space for the spread of the town. The anchorage is excellent, vessels of the largest size being able to lie so near shore as to land goods without lightering. The back country, including the Napa and Sonoma valleys, is one of the finest agricultural districts of California. . . . Benicia – very properly, as I think – has been made the Naval and Military Station for the bay. General Smith and Commodore Jones both have their headquarters there. The General's house and the military barracks are built on a headland at the entrance of Suisun Bay – a breezy and healthy situation. Monte Diablo, the giant of the Coast Range, rises high and blue on the other side of the strait, and away beyond the waters of the bay, beyond the waste marshes of tule and the broad grazing plains, and above the low outlines of many an intermediate chain, loom up faint and far and silvery the snows of the Sierra Nevada.

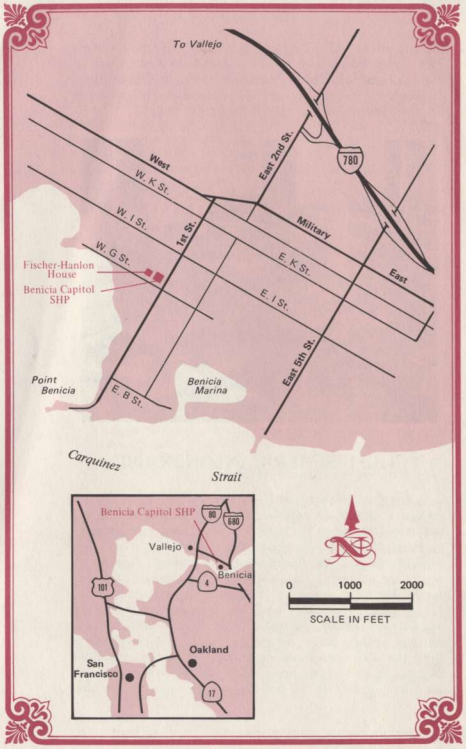
From ***El Dorado*** by Bayard Taylor, 1858

The old capitol building was used as the Solano County Courthouse until 1858 when the county government moved to Fairfield. Episcopal services were held in the building during parts of 1854 and 1855, and Benicia's grammar school was housed in the building for many years. About 1860 a wood frame wing was added for use by the fire department, and the Benicia public library moved into another part of the building. The Assembly chambers on the second floor were used by successive generations of Benicians for dances, lectures, and other entertainments, and in the years preceding 1956 the building once again served as Benicia's City Hall.

In 1951 the State of California took steps to acquire the building as a State Historic Monument, and in 1958, after years of painstaking research and careful, thoroughgoing restoration, the building was opened to the public as Benicia Capitol State Historic Park. Today it is the only one of California's early capitol buildings that is still standing. (The westernmost portion of the present capitol in Sacramento including the gold-domed rotunda was built during the 1860s and officially occupied in November 1869.)

THE FISCHER-HANLON HOUSE

The fourteen-room frame structure next to the old Capitol Building in Benicia was orginally built during the gold rush for use as a hotel. Damaged by fire in 1856, it was subsequently purchased by Joseph Fischer, a Swiss merchant and cattleman who had come to California in 1849. Fischer moved the damaged hotel to its present site and turned it into a private residence for himself and his family. The house was occupied by successive generations of the Fischer family until 1969, when his granddaughters, Raphaelita and Catherine Hanlon, donated it to the State of California as a memorial to their family, and more particularly their sister, Marie Rose. The house offers a unique opportunity to observe some of the trappings of 19th-century upper middle class life as it was lived in the quiet little riverside city that was once the capital of California.



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ABOUT YOUR VISIT

Benicia Capitol State Historic Park is open to the public from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day of the year except Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's. Tour arrangements can be made by contacting the park staff.

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